

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Western Veterinary Conference Hosts Women's Leadership Symposium

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

March 3, 2014

The February 17th symposium on Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine at the Western Veterinary Conference (WVC) in Las Vegas attracted over 100 people during the four-hour presentation. The audience included recent graduates, like Dr. Eva Evans, a Las Vegas practitioner who graduated just 20 months ago from the University of Tennessee,<sup>1</sup> and Dr. Sarah Coburn, a Public Health Officer and practicing veterinarian on the North Slope of Alaska. She graduated from Colorado State University in 2009.

Most of the attendees were already experienced leaders in the profession. Jennifer Durenberger, DVM (2002), JD, is the Director of Racing for Massachusetts. Colonel Robin K. King, DVM, PhD, DACVPM<sup>2</sup>, another mid-career veterinarian, told me that she came to the symposium because she wanted to learn more about women's leadership opportunities in the military. Dr. Dave Gerber, a practitioner in Idaho, excitedly told me he "gets it" —that is, he understands the need for more women in leadership. He shared with me his interest in reading Sheryl Sandberg's book "Lean In,"<sup>3</sup> given to him recently by his daughter.

Besides Dr. Douglas Aspros, immediate past president of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and one of the four speakers, other senior AVMA executives included Dr. Ted Cohn, president-elect, and Dr. Janet Donlin, CEO of the Professional Liability Insurance Trust.

Also present was Dr. Karen Padgett, Chief Operating Officer of Ceva Animal Health, LLC.<sup>4</sup> At the midway juncture of the morning's presentation, she presented a check for \$15,000 to Dr. Karen Bradley, president of the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative (WVLDI).<sup>5</sup> This extraordinary financial support—the first of its kind from industry and just six months after the WVLDI was established—provided an unquantifiable boost to morale for those who have worked tirelessly to launch the initiative. Just two months ago, the AVMA provided \$25,000 in program support. This support from Ceva and the AVMA allows the WVLDI to launch several new initiatives, and make plans to reach broader audiences of veterinarians.

As I listened to Dr. Padgett speak to the WVLDI directors later that day in a joint strategy meeting, I could not help but remark publically that I had seldom met anyone whose leadership skills were so evident in personal style, commitment, and action. What an honor for the group to benefit from her company's support and encouragement.

Lea-Ann Germinder of Germinder & Associates, Inc.,<sup>6</sup> one of the leading communications specialists in veterinary medicine, announced the attendance of many representatives of the media, including the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* and *DVM360*.

The program featured four presenters. Drs. Aspros, Dr. Bradley and I represented organized veterinary medicine, practice ownership, and academia. Julie Kumble represented the broader domain of women's leadership in society.



*Karen Bradley, DVM*  
*President, WVLDI*  
(Photo provided by AVMA)



*Julie Kumble, MEd*  
*Interim CEO, Women's Fund*  
*of Western Massachusetts*  
(Photo provided by Ms. Kumble)



*Douglas Aspros, DVM*  
*Past President, AVMA*  
(Photo provided by Dr. Aspros)

Julie Kumble and I lectured for the first two hours under the title, "*Minding the Gap and Sharing Solutions*," referring to the gap between the large percentage of women in the profession as a whole, and the relatively small percentage who occupy senior leadership positions. We presented data and anecdotal information gathered from interviewing over 40 leaders in the veterinary profession—including several men—to raise the awareness of leadership challenges (we used the prevailing term, "leadership gap") in the four areas of organized veterinary medicine, academia (especially the dean level), industry, and clinical medicine (especially ownership of veterinary practices).

One goal of our presentation was to describe challenges women face in attaining leadership positions by examining institutional and systemic barriers to women's advancement. We also shared information about those gender-based perceptions and personal traits that sometimes hinder attainment of leadership positions for women. To give concrete examples of success stories gleaned from our many interviews, we shared best practices from within and outside of the veterinary profession. For example, we presented data on how the Iowa State Veterinary Medical Association has made institutional changes to assure greater representation of women and also younger veterinarians in their leadership team in the past 12 years.

The second part of the symposium, presented by Drs. Bradley and Aspros, was aptly named, "*Women of Vetlandia, How to find personal and professional success in the world of organized*

*veterinary medicine.*” By tag-teaming in an entertaining and informative manner, they outlined how veterinarians can get involved in the professional affairs at a regional, state, and national level. They described the number and variety of opportunities in a manner that made it appealing for veterinarians in all stages of the profession, as well as how to balance day-job responsibilities with broader service. As the more recent graduate, Dr. Bradley shared personal insights into how this balance could be achieved, even as a mother, wife, and co-owner of a three-doctor practice.

During the final hour of the symposium, the audience was invited to sit in the front of the auditorium. The four speakers and two additional directors of the WVLDI (Drs. Rachel Cezar and Stacy Pritt) convened a more direct exchange, providing the opportunity for everyone to participate. For many attendees, this was the most interesting part of the session.

Dr. Cezar, who also served as moderator of the program, had the additional responsibility of collecting and summarizing the evaluation forms completed by attendees. She identified several issues that should be addressed before a similar program of this nature is presented in the future. For example, we need to provide greater clarity about what the WVLDI can provide for women veterinarians, such as information on leadership training programs and mentoring. We were also urged to provide information on women in a broader array of specific segments of the profession, such as the military. Some asked how students can get involved.

We received many positive comments: *“THANK YOU, THANK YOU”*; *“Every vet should be here [attending],”* *“This has been a long time coming,”* and *“Looking forward to getting involved.”* Both constructive criticism and positive responses provided encouragement and guidance for moving forward.

For me, the capstone of the feedback was a comment the following morning by Dr. Joni Samuels, a practice owner from southern California and incoming director of the WVC,<sup>7</sup> as we rushed past each other to our respective meetings. A friend for many years, and one whom I can depend upon for being thoughtfully observant, Joni said, *“You guys have the right approach and are on track. Now all you need to do is find answers!”*

With guidance from people like Dr. Samuels<sup>8</sup> and other leaders in the profession, I think we shall indeed find answers and help move veterinary medicine forward.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Evans is the most recent appointee to the AVMA’s Political Action Committee. See Evans, Eva. A Path to Leadership for a New DVM: The Story of Dr. Eva Evans. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, Sep 29, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> ACVPM, [American College of Veterinary Preventive Medicine](#).

<sup>3</sup> Sandberg, Sheryl (2013). *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

<sup>4</sup> [Ceva Animal Health, LLC](#), with US headquarters in Lenexa, Kansas, has been ranked as one of the top three fastest-growing animal pharmaceutical companies in the world during the last five years.

<sup>5</sup> [Women’s Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative](#) (WVLDI), established in fall 2013 and whose mission is to support women in seeking and achieving leadership, policy, and decision-making positions within all areas of professional veterinary activity.

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<sup>6</sup> [Germander & Associates](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Western Veterinary Conference Board of Director Winners](#)

<sup>8</sup> Dr. Samuels has just been elected as one of the directors of the Western Veterinary Conference. She previously has held position as president of the California Veterinary Medical Association and member of the AVMA Executive Board.

KEYWORDS:

Women's Leadership in Veterinary Medicine  
Women Veterinarians  
Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative  
American Veterinary Medical Association  
Douglas Aspros  
Karen Bradley  
Julie Kumble  
Karen Padgett  
Rachel Cezar  
Stacy Pritt  
Joni Samuels  
Ceva Animal Health  
American Veterinary Medical Association

TOPIC:

Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative

LEADING QUESTION:

What is WVLDI (Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative)?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.